Τιµη, Γερας, and Mother: The Woman Paradox in the Iliad

Women play a paradoxical role in the κλεος focused social system depicted in the Iliad. As Menelaus attempts to reclaim his slighted honor through the Trojan War, women are either prizes to be won or suffering wives and consorts. In both cases women are deprived of their autonomy and defined by their relationship to men. Even though they are marginalized and dehumanized by this system, women are integral to the system’s operation. Although women cannot gain glory themselves, they are biologically necessary for the preservation of a man’s honor and legacy; they are the most literal form of τιµη as women produce the offspring that will carry a man’s legacy. Women are τιµη but unable to gain τιµε for themselves, demonstrating the inherent paradox of Homer’s honor driven social system.

One prominent role of women in Iliad is that of a γερας. Women captured in war quite literally become prizes to be distributed to the victorious men. This objectification of women is evident in both the role they play in the narrative as well as the language used to describe them. Regarding Briseis, the γερας of Achilles, Nestor says, “leave her, just as the sons of Achaea gave her, his prize from the very first” (1, 322-323). Briseis becomes an object to given, received, and owned by men rather than a person. Nestor

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1 Fame, glory, rumor
2 Honor, esteem
3 Prize, gift of honor
discusses her in the third person and never as a character with agency; Briseis is the object of the verbs “leave” and “gave” as opposed to an active subject. Not only is Briseis a prize, but she is “his prize”; her relationship with Achilles defines her identity. The role of γερας dehumanizes women by turning them from active characters into objects for men to pass about and own.

This lack of autonomy is not only present in the female γερας but also can be seen in the treatment of the long-suffering wives and consorts of warriors. These women are constantly defined by their connection to the dominant men in their lives. Andromache, wife of Hector, is described as “the daughter of gallant-hearted Eetion” (6, 467). Along with this patrilineal characterization, women are defined by who their husbands are. Hector speculates on the fate of his wife, Andromache, after the fall of Troy: “And a man may say, who sees you streaming tears, “there is the wife of Hector, the bravest fighter they could field, those stallion-breaking Trojans’”” (6, 547-549). Even after relocation to a far off land with Hector long dead, Andromache’s relationship to Hector defines her; Andromache’s status as a wife precludes her status as an autonomous woman.

While the κλεος focused society present in the world of the Iliad dehumanizes and marginalizes women, it requires women to operate. One nature of fame is fame derived from one’s own accomplishments, while another is fame derived from the fame of your descendants. Women are biologically necessary for men to attain legacy through descendants; through siring offspring men ensure that both their name and an element of their physical self live on. Hector prays to Zeus regarding his son Scamandrius, “Grant this boy, my son, may be like me, first in glory among the Trojans, strong and brave like
me” (6, 568-570). As long as Scamandrius thrives as Hector did, a piece of Hector will linger on and his reputation will be preserved; when Scamandrius is sung of, he will be called perhaps “Scamandrius, son of shining-helmed Hector, breaker of horses” and Hector’s name will live on. However, in order for Hector to have this legacy, Andromache must provide Hector with a child. Women are biologically necessary for this element of fame.

If κλεος is the ultimate goal of the society, then men ideally will gain as much τιµη as they can to contribute to their reputation and increase their fame. The more women a man mates with, the greater number of offspring he will sire and the more physical remnants of himself he will leave behind. Simultaneously with this role as mothers, women can play the role of γερας. In both what they are as prizes and what function they serve as baby makers, women are literally τιµη. For example, after the loss of his γερας Chryseis, Agamemnon commands:

….. fetch me another prize, and straight off too,

else I alone of the Argives go without my honor.

That would be a disgrace. You are all witness,

look—my prize snatched away!

(1, 138-141)

In this passage Agamemnon equates the possession of a prize with the possession of honor. The desperation in his tone and his clipped sentence structure betray how deeply Agamemnon is concerned with the possession of a prize. A woman is not just an embodiment of honor, but honor itself. Not only γερας are τιµη, but wives and consorts are as well. Achilles snaps at Agamemnon and Menelaus, “we all followed you, to please
you, to fight for you, to win your honor back from the Trojans” (1, 186-188). In this instance honor refers to Menelaus’ wife Helen, swept away by the Trojan Paris. The entire Trojan War is not a response to Menelaus losing his wife, but Menelaus having his honor stolen and his reputation placed in jeopardy. Just as a war trophy is honor and thus can be won, owned, and stolen, thus are women.

The connection between women and this system of tangible honor is paradoxical. On both a symbolic and physical level, women’s identity is reduced to honor men can gain. Even though women are the currency of this honor system, they cannot gain honor for themselves, as they are not considered to be their own autonomous persons. Every facet of women’s role in the Iliad is defined by some external factor rather than an intrinsic drive of women. Men deem women possessions, men take a wife to sire children upon, men determine women are honor and subjugate them to all the burdens that label comes with. Women are simultaneously the most valuable and most marginalized party in the Homeric world of the Iliad.